

Castlemaine Naturalist



November '98
#250 Vol 22.10

BABBLINGS FROM BARKERS CREEK #12

Brush-tailed Phascogales, or Tuans

The Brush-tailed Phascogale, or Tuan, is a small, nocturnal, arboreal, carnivorous marsupial of the family Dasyuridae. This species is found in Western Australia, Northern Territory, Queensland, New South Wales and in a band of country through the centre of Victoria. There have been sightings in and around Castlemaine. Another species is the Red-tailed Phascogale, and is found in the south west tip of Western Australia.

The Brush-tailed Phascogale is a uniform deep grey on the head, back and flanks, pale cream underneath with large naked ears and has a conspicuous black, bushy tail. Adults, which grow up to over 400mm (15.¾ inches), have been found in a variety of treed habitats having a reliable annual rainfall between 500 and 2000mm per annum.

The females have a home range estimated at 30 to 60 ha. and the areas do not overlap. The males forage over areas larger than 100ha. containing both females and other males. Observers have noted that the Tuans are primarily arboreal and forage for their diet, which is mainly large insects, spiders and centipedes, on trunks and main branches of rough barked trees and fallen logs.

Tuans nest in as many as 30 different sites each year. Nests can be found in dead or live trees, under flaking bark, in tree stumps or nesting boxes. However, during the nesting period competition for secure, small entranced cavities can be very intense. Mating occurs in early spring and most males die after breeding at the age of 11 to 12 months. Litters of seven or eight young are born between July and August after a gestation period of 30 days. The young remain in the pouch for the first seven weeks and thereafter are left in the nursery nest while the mother forages at night. Females rarely survive a second year.

There has been a serious decline in numbers, primarily due to loss of

habitat, the reduction in the quality of habitat (older trees) and fragmentation of the forests, the Red Fox and domestic and feral cats. The Tuan's breeding strategy makes it prone to the loss of an isolated population if that group fails to breed in any one year, or in a region due to bush fires.

The Brush-tailed Phascogale (Tuan) is one of the many dry forest and woodland species of fauna which are threatened with extinction in South-eastern Australia, including the Squirrel Glider, Regent Honeyeater, Bush Stone-curlew and Grey-crowned Babbler, primarily due to the loss of habitat (box/ironbark) and introduced species.

Tuans have gained a reputation as a determined slayer of chickens but this can easily overcome by proper secure housing.

They are beautiful and interesting animals with a lovely soft fur. They are rare, but a sighting will make nocturnal walks worthwhile.

John Turnbull

References - *Action Statement No 79, Dept Natural Resources and Environment.*

Mammals Australia, Ronald Strahan

V.N.P.A. Spring Camp

The Victorian National Parks Association weekend Campout was held at the Kara Kara State Park south of St. Arnaud, Oct 9 - 11, under the expert leadership of Charlie Sherwin.

The theme of the camp was the exploration of Western Victoria's Box/Ironbark forests, and included walking, birding, botanizing and spotlighting. This we did in fine, mild, but somewhat cloudy conditions, with great success on all counts.

Kara Kara State Park covers some 4,000 ha and is surrounded by the 20,000 ha St Arnaud Range State Forest, and is a veritable wonderland of Box/Ironbark flora and fauna. It is easy to see how Charlie and the "Friends of" group maintain eagerness, commitment and enthusiasm in their quest for the preservation of these threatened woodlands.

The flora and fauna had no chance whatsoever of avoiding observation and identification with members of the camp including Rod Orr, Neil Marriot, Garry Cheers and Simon Kennedy among the 30 strong contingent.

We arrived on Saturday morning in time to set up camp and participate

in a bush walk in and around the camp area. The bird life was prolific and wildflowers in abundance.

Our afternoon excursion took us to the Dalynong Flora Reserve to see Box/Ironbark woodland flora at its very best. The wildflowers were a carpet of many colours with some significant observations. Our favourites were the Crimson Sun Orchid (*Thelymitra macmillanii*), Blue Sun Orchid (*T. nuda*) and the many Green-comb Spider Orchids (*Caledenia dilitata*).

From the beautiful to the ugly, Charlie took us to a section of the forest undergoing LEGAL!! logging. Then on to a mining operation, both of which are having a devastating effect on our fragile woodlands.

The afternoon excursion concluded at the top of a high ridge, giving an excellent panorama of central Western Victoria, including the Grampians.

At night we headed off with the spotlights in the hope of finding Sugar Gliders and Tuans, but it was not to be. Some possums and the call of the Powerful Owl were the highlights of the evening.

The Sunday excursion was to the mature forest in the nearby Teddington Range. We were unable to make this trip, but stayed and explored the reservoirs in the Park.

We recorded a total of 50 birds.

A wonderful and educational time was had by all and we look forward to the Autumn camp.

Ken and Maureen Dredge.

Warrnambool Campout.

On the weekend of October 16 - 18 the Warrnambool Field Naturalists hosted a Campout to mark their 40th birthday. The meeting at which the club was inaugurated was called in February 1948. Forty years on 50 - 60 Field Naturalists from clubs in Victoria gathered in Warrnambool for the Victorian Field Naturalists Association Spring Campout.

We enjoyed a most interesting weekend and the warm and generous hospitality of the W.F.N.C. members. Thanks are due to many, but particularly to the two Joans, Yeoman and Shanahan, who organized and prepared so well for the comfort and pleasure of our visit.

On Saturday the excursion by bus was led by Dr. John Sherwood

who is a Lecturer in Environmental Science at the Deakin University. His extensive knowledge of the geomorphology of the coast, and also geology and botany made the morning stop at Childers Cove a great experience as we looked on the area with new eyes. Fossils were found, and plants identified on the cliffs.

The afternoon was spent at the Ralph Illidge Sanctuary. Walking Through the lush bush we marvelled at the regeneration following the 1983 fires. A number of birds were seen, including Scrub Wrens and Yellow Robins.

On the return trip to Warrnambool we visited the Hopkins Falls. We were delighted and surprised by the size of the falls.

On Sunday our leader was geologist Dr. Jack Douglas. He imparted much knowledge of volcanoes as we travelled to Tower Hill. Tower Hill is now a fine example of the regeneration of an area once spoiled and denuded by over-grazing and clearing in the 19th century.

The district of Warrnambool was very largely settled by Irish immigrants. The Irish influence is to be seen in the many Irish names, including Killarney Beach, so it was fitting to conclude our visit with a fine barbeque at Killarney.

Margery Cross

There were also evening programs. On Friday night we had the choice of slides in the hall or to go over to Port Fairy to watch the Muttonbirds coming in at dusk. On Saturday night, after the V.N.C.A. annual meeting, there was a dinner, at which our President, George Broadway, had the honour of cutting the cake as he was one of the original members of the Warrnambool Club. Dr. David Bennett was the speaker and gave a slide lecture on the mammals, past and present, of the western half of Victoria.

Also, at the Illidge Sanctuary several people who were familiar with the Sanctuary were taken by one of the Warrnambool people to the Annex, a block which has been added across the road, and which is now regenerating nicely.

Not everyone went to Tower Hill on Sunday morning as there was a second excursion to Killarney, and several of us went there - and were almost blown back to Warrnambool! At the Basin, despite the wind, we watched Red-legged Stints, Ruddy Turnstones, Pied Oystercatchers and White-fronted Chats on the beach, and a poor, bewildered, little Grey Fantail clinging for dear life in the marram grass where it had apparently been blown off course. There were also gannets and a Shy Albatross seen over the water. The people who walked along the beach to the boat launching area where we met them had the pleasure of seeing three groups of Hooded Plovers.

Rita Mills

Nest Boxes and Bees

The heavy frosts of July and August have almost defoliated our ancient Pepper tree, and on returning home from holidays at the end of August we observed a steady procession of bees to and from the entrance of the parrot nesting box which is situated in this tree. Indignant parrots had been shrieking and swooping around the garden for days, both Crimson and Eastern Rosellas. We called on a friendly local apiarist for

help, and early one cool morning, with a few puffs of smoke, and after sealing the gaps and entrance to the box, it was gently transferred from the tree to the back of his utility truck and taken away. A couple of days later he returned with the empty box and a jar of delicious local honey for us!

The bees had apparently moved in at the end of last nesting season as the box was full of honey and comb. We were advised not to use the box again, as the smell of honey permeated the timber and is likely to attract another passing swarm.

A replacement was erected, and inspected on several occasions by the parrots, but it has not been occupied. It is probably too late in the season by now.

It has been suggested that such boxes should have slits near the top to allow some light in, which is said to discourage bees from taking up residence.

Shirley Parnaby

PLANTS OF THE MOUNT ALEXANDER SHIRE

Primrose Goodenia or Native Pansy

(*Goodenia blackiana*)



This little herb has only been named in the last 10 years or so. The bright yellow flowers with their winged petals, two up, three down (compared with *Vellies* which have three up and two down) rise from a narrow calyx tube which encloses and often conceals the style with its hooded stigma, which rises above a cylinder of erect stamens. The ovary is below the petals, and the sepals are fused to part way up the calyx tube. Only 2 or 3 cms high, the flowers just rise above the greyish green, slightly toothed rosette of basal leaves, which are slightly hairy underneath. They usually flower in mid to late spring. This year there has been

a particularly good show on the Monk.

References (Description of *Goodenia* genus) - Collins Field Guide to Flowers of South-East Australia, by Jean Galbraith

Fly Puts Bite on Boneseed

The fight against Boneseed weed took a big step forward recently with the official release of the Lacy-winged Seed Fly in the You Yangs Regional Park, where 120 insects were released, and in Daveys Bay, Frankston, where another 60 were released. The You Yangs and the Mornington Peninsular are the worst affected areas in the state. In Castlemaine it is found in Kaweka Wildflower Sanctuary, but is regularly pulled and seldom seen now, but one or two plants are in a road-verge planting in the north of

the town!

Boneseed grows up to 2m high, with bright yellow daisy flowers, with a hard white seed which persists as a viable seed for years - it has been recorded as remaining viable for 25 years. It is one of the state's most prolific weeds, spreading across most of the west and south of the state. Smothering native plants, it is most damaging on the Mornington Peninsula and in the You Yangs Regional Park.

The Seed Fly was collected in South Africa and bred under quarantine at the Keith Turnbull Research Institute, in Frankston, and carefully tested to ensure it only attacked Boneseed. It is part of a plan to attack Boneseed on several fronts. In New South Wales the Tip Moth is destroying developing buds, and the Tortoise Beetle is eating the leaves.

"Other Biological agents being studied include a rust fungus and a leaf roller moth. Both show great promise and are expected to have a devastating effect," the Institute's Robin Adair said.

A small number of Lacy-winged Seed Flies were recently released in infestations of Bitou Bush, a close relative the Boneseed, in NSW. It has spread at a rate of 400m a month, infesting up to 80% of flower heads and reducing its seeding by up to 40%.

Adapted from an article by Mark Wembridge, which was published in the Ballarat FNC Newsletter.

Barfold Gorge Outing

Five Cars left for Barfold on Saturday Oct 10, with several visitors besides some of the local Field Nats. Although cloudy and a bit cool it was a very pleasant day for our outing. When we arrived we were greeted by a large number of mothers and children, all of the Hereford family by the look of them. However they didn't mind us joining them in the paddock, and we dodged cow pats as we walked down to the gorge.

Those who had been there before couldn't quite remember where things were, so we walked along the rim enjoying and exploring. There were not very many birds, and to my surprise, no raptors on the day, though lime on the cliffs showed that they are usually around.

We walked upstream, crossing a small side creek, until we came to a small waterfall. The river was flowing well, with plenty of water over the falls. On the way back we stopped again to admire a beautiful Red Gum. It took four of us holding hands to reach right round the trunk - which a couple of the maths wizards worked out to be a circumference of, I think, 6.5 metres or 21 feet.

We walked back downstream until we came to the next falls, which are quite impressive, with basalt cliffs and tumbled rocks down in the gorge at the big bend. Swamp Wallabies were seen down there, Yellow Box trees below the falls were flowering at our level, and a Red-bellied Black Snake was sunning itself on a rock on the rim, while a pair of black Ducks flew away from the river and Frank Carpenter pointed out a beautiful Australian Admiral butterfly fluttering around and landing wings spread, before closing them and hiding those glorious colours. Earlier he had pointed out some Small Grass Yellows, a very dainty butterfly with yellow wings with a small black apex to each upper wing.

We finally straggled back past the curious cows and calves to enjoy a well earned afternoon tea about 4.30pm. Comments suggested that we'd all had a most enjoyable day.

Rita Mills

Observations

* Margaret Badminton has found that the Eastern Rosellas which had been investigating a hollow in a fence post at her place at Yapeen have 7 eggs in the nest (usual number is 5 to 7). It will be interesting to see how many chicks the pair manage to raise. She

has also seen Crimson Rosellas apparently nesting in a wall in the Falder Watson Hall.

* Margaret also reported seeing a Mistletoe Bird at Vaughan Springs after rain recently and George Broadway reported one in his garden in Wheeler St.

* Also from Margaret is a report from a friend who has been watching a family of wrens frantically feeding a very hungry Pallid Cuckoo fledgling. The question is - How did the cuckoo manage to lay in a Blue Wrens' nest!?

*Dora Berenyi reported that they were not able to go on with their roofing as a pair of Welcome Swallows had been busy while they were away and have built a mud nest in the roof area.

* While birding out at Nuggetty the group which Maggie Oliver was with was able to look down over a Wedgetail Eagles' nest and later in the day, from Tarrengower, they were able to look down on a Peregrine Falcons' nest with two young in it.

* While visiting friends in Turner Street Margaret Willis was watching while soil was being moved from a heap. One part of the heap was being left and when she asked questions she was told that that heap had a pair of Pardalotes nesting in it. This was despite the fact that the heap was relatively fresh and not compacted.

* Natalie de Maccus was mystified to see kangaroos in the garden at Barkers Creek picking up sticks in their forepaws, and eating the bark off them, ignoring the available grass. Has anyone else observed this behaviour?

* Natalie also reported finding many (perhaps 50) Wax-lip Orchids decapitated. A neighbour suggested that Blue-tongued Lizards may be the culprits.

* From ZOe Turner - *verbatim* - " 'Murder in Broad Daylight' "

Sat Oct 3, ¼ to 3pm, on Highway in Campbells Creek among housing.

Falcon bombed a flock and took out a victim.

Dashed onto bitumen before shooting off in a flash!

Whereabouts unknown!"

* Ken Dredge noted that in the 4 or 5 hours they spent Bird-atlassing in Muckleford forest they were surprised at the scarcity of honeyeaters. The only two species seen for the day were Fuscous and Yellow-tufted.

* There has been a resident Willie Wagtail at Little Bendigo for some time now, but no sign of a mate, however he has been trying hard, flitting and flirting around the place and singing his little heart out, even at night time. Recently he was spotted giving one of the local Magpies a hard time, swooping and worrying it, trying to make it move out of his territory apparently. Chris and Helen Morris.

* A friend of ZOe Turner told her of an incident where a pair of Grey Shrike-thrushes have been removing the lining of a no-longer used Magpie nest. Apparently the Magpies had used the nest for three years in a row but this season must have decided to nest elsewhere - which has been the opportunity for the thrushes do a little house (re)moving.

FRIENDS OF THE BOX AND IRONBARK FOREST Public Meeting

Wed Nov. 18

R.S.L. Hall

Mostyn St., Castlemaine

7.30pm

Keynote speaker - Charlie Sherwin, VNPA Box Ironbark Campaign
Officer

Chair - Councillor Jock MacRae

FROM THE BUSINESS MEETING

Legislation now requires the Club to have a Grievance Officer, and it was decided that, from the next A.G.M. in February 1999, the vice-President will act in that capacity.

C.F.N.C. PROGRAMME

General Meetings are held in the Uniting Church (UCA) hall, at 8.00 pm on the second Friday of each month, except January. Entrances to the car parks are beside the Art Gallery and beside the Church building in Lyttleton Street.

Excursions leave promptly at times stated, usually on the Saturday after the general meeting. There are NO excursions on TOTAL FIRE BAN days.

Business Meetings are held at 38 Campbell Street on the 4th Thursday of each month, except December, at 7.30pm. All members are invited to attend.

VISITORS ALWAYS WELCOME TO CLUB MEETINGS AND EXCURSIONS

Fri. Nov. 13 **Heaths**. Speaker is Hillary Weatherhead. UCA hall 8pm.

Sat Nov 14. **Terrick Terrick**. All day outing. The day will include a guided tour of the adjoining native grasslands arranged by Shirley Diez of DNRE. Leave 27 Doveton St. at 9.30am. Take lunch and afternoon tea, binoculars, etc.

Fri Dec 11 **Regent Honeyeaters**. Speaker, David Gearing. This is a change from the advertised program as we have the opportunity in December to hear this very interesting speaker. Based in Melbourne, David Geering has studied the breeding Biology of Regent Honeyeaters in New South Wales for three years. 8pm UCA hall. "Bring a Plate" supper. (The Members and Visitors night will now be held in February).

Sat Dec 12 **Tullaroop Res. BYO Picnic Tea**. Leader M. Oliver. Official leaving time from 13 Mostyn St. will be 3.30pm, but some people might like to make their own way out at an earlier time.

Fri Feb. 12 1999 **ANNUAL MEETING and Members and Visitors Night**.

Remember to take the camera with you during the summer break, and be ready to contribute some of your own nature slides to the evening's program!

GDT PUBLIC WALKS. The Nov. walk is on Sun 29/11, from Mt Blackwook (Square Bottle Track via Mt Blackwood/Trentham Road) to Darley Ford. Rated Difficult, and for experienced walkers, estimated time is from 7-8 hours. Starting time 9am. Food, drinks must be carried and suitable footwear and clothing worn.

IT IS ESSENTIAL that you contact the leader, Ed Butler (5348 30590) at least 4 days prior to the walk.

Committee; G. Broadway (Pres.), M. Dredge (V.P.), B. Maund (Sec.), M. Badminton (Treas.), R. Mills (N/L Ed. and P.O.), J. Turnbull, M. Oliver, C. Morris, K. Turner, E. Perkins.

Subscriptions - Ordinary membership: Single \$16, Family \$24

Pensioner/student: Single \$12, Family \$18 Supporting : \$25

Newsletter posted: Membership + \$6

Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club Inc.

P.O. Box 324, Castlemaine. 3450.

Incorporation N^o A3010